**Making Concepts Meaningful: A Practice-Based Approach to Concept Formation**

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**Abstract**: One of the pillars of qualitative methods is their attention to context. Much has been written about how case knowledge is necessary to uncover causal process observations that allow scholars to make causal inferences in case studies. Another trait of qualitative methods is attention to concepts and the effort to make clear the core attributes that define concepts. In this realm, recent advances in the field have theorized about the different strategies that scholars may adopt to make the core attributes of their concepts clear as well as how these attributes may aggregate. Less attention, however, is devoted to making concepts more attuned to the context under study and to empirical reality. This paper argues that attention to context and contingency are essential not only for causal inference but also for concept formation. The use of techniques such as family resemblance or diminished subtypes allow for the operationalization of more flexible concepts, but they are not the tools that can make scholars build concepts that are more attuned to context. Drawing on the work of interpretivists in political science (Bevir and Kedar 2008; Schaffer 2014), this paper argues that to incorporate contingency and context in concept formation, scholars need to pay attention to the meanings of these concepts in ordinary language and practice. If meaning is constitutive of human action, the way individuals use and practice concepts is part of the causal power of such concepts. As qualitative scholars have long recognized, the way we define and operationalize our concepts has downright consequences for the questions that we ask and the ones we can answer. This paper illustrates with the concept of clientelism the difference that a practice-based approach to concepts can make in contrast to classic and family resemblance approaches to concept formation.